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ABSTRACT

The ability of the special education student to make a smooth transition into the adult world depends upon a number of criteria, beginning with the support and assistance of family, friends, and school personnel. An appropriate curriculum for high school students with mild disabilities should accomplish the same goal as one designed for all high school students: to prepare them to exit high school with the fundamental skills for becoming independent, contributing members of their communities. In order to accommodate students with developmental disabilities, changes should be made in four areas of the curriculum: (1) basic knowledge and skills such as reading, computation, and study skills; (2) academic knowledge and skills such as literature, chemistry, and history; (3) occupational knowledge and skills such as job finding and work experience; and (4) independent living knowledge and skills such as budgeting, home management, and social skills. In order to have more time to spend on basic, occupational, and independent living skills, developmentally disabled students may have to spend less time on academic subjects. School systems need to address these areas more closely by having their curriculum meet the needs of their students. By careful reorganization of the curriculum, the gap between school and adult life may be diminished. (KC)

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A Call for Curricular Change: Bridging the Gap Between School and Community Living

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Running head: A CALL FOR CURRICULAR CHANGE: BRIDGING THE GAP

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Abtract

The focus of this paper is to describe four areas of curriculum that need modification or change to better meet the needs of young adults who are developmentally disabled. For each curriculum area noted, a rationale for modification is presented. Also discussed is how the modification would better prepare a young adult to make a smooth transition from school to community living and into the workplace. It concludes with a call for change with the cooperation of all involved parties and cites the fine work of the Young Adult Institute in helping to "bridge the gap".

The ability of the special education student to make a smooth transition into the adult world depends upon a number of criteria, beginning with the support and assistance of family, friends, and school personnel. Without this initial support, many young adults who are developmentally disabled will experience difficulties in adjusting to community living and employment.

The obstacles many young handicapped adults face is in part determined by their high school experience, and the ability of special education programs to properly prepare them for leaving the security of high school. For all students, the high school experience represents a period of transition between the security of school and the complexities associated with the opportunities and risks of adult life(Halpern, Benz, 1987,p.507). This transition into the "real world" involves decisions ranging from where to attend college to vocation and career choices. Young adults with disabilities face these challenges and other complex issues.

The deficiencies in vocational preparation opportunities for secondary students with mild disabilities and the importance of these opportunities for successful transition into the workplace are receiving increasing attention (Benz, Halpern 1987). The need to broaden and strengthen the quality of educational experiences received by handicapped youths in the transitional phase of their education is imperative (Rusch, Phelps, 1987,p.488). Because a better preparation on the high school level is needed if successful transition into community living is to be accomplished, of the utmost importance is the need for special education programs to focus more strongly on the basic skills needed to survive on one's own.

It goes without saying that an appropriate curriculum for high school students with mild disabilities should accomplish the same goal as one designed for all high school students and that is to prepare them to exit high school with the fundamental skills for becoming independent, contributing members of their communities (Halpern, Benz, 1987,p.125). However, with mainstreaming, and special education students spending more time in regular classrooms, a main concern of many professionals is the balance of time spent in the different areas of curriculum.

The four domains that accommodate the needs of all secondary students, whether or not they have disabilities are a) basic knowledge and skills such as reading, computation, and study skills; b) academic knowledge and skills such as literature, chemistry, and history; c)occupational knowledge and skills such as job-finding and work experience, and d) independent living knowledge and skills such as budjeting, home management and social skills (Halpern, Benz, 1987,p.123). The controversy over appropriate curriculum stems from the concern of many educators who feel that some children with disabilities about to enter the adult arena need more time learning about budgeting and living on their own than they do on chemistry and history.

A recent study conducted in Oregon (Halpern, Benz 1987) on the status of high school special education programs for students with mild disabilities substantiates that there is considerable disagreement about appropriate curriculum. The study surveyed administrators, teachers and parents on the availability and usage

of different curriculum services. Administrators and teachers were asked if these services were available to students with mild disabilities; parents were asked if their children actually used the services. The results were interesting to note. In all but traditional academics (where availability and usage differed only slightly), the results indicated that a large percentage of the children with mild disabilities are not utilizing the services available.

Of special concern, as stated previously, are areas such as vocational preparation, leisure and recreation skills, home-living skills and personal/social skills - areas that are vital for successful transition.

The focus of this article will be to address the specific areas in curriculum where these skills are taught and to suggest modifications or changes so that the transition into the workfield or community living is easier.

Leisure/Recreational Skills

This is an area where mainstreaming becomes particularly important. It is critical that young adults with disabilities interact and engage in leisure and recreational activities with their non-handicapped peers for two reasons. First, any mainstreaming may improve their self-concepts (Kirk, Gallagher 1986). Secondly, interacting with their peers in recreational and leisure activities might motivate these young adults to pursue these interests after high school. One disadvantage is the non-acceptance by their

peers which might be addressed in an extra curricula leisure program geared towards both handicapped and non-handicapped students.

Peer interaction and skills that are recreationally or leisure oriented (music appreciation, art, dance, etc.) will enable a young adult with disabilities to make a smoother transition into a community residence where these skills can further be developed. Also, interest in any specific area might enable them to strive for job-related programs with these interests in mind.

Vocational Preparation

A special education curriculum for high schoolers who are developmentally disabled would include part of the day in a vocational training atmosphere, most likely in a resource room. Here they receive special training on career education and job-readiness skills such as getting along with co-workers, using bus transportation, punctuality and attendance. A modification in the curriculum might include a rebalancing of time spent in academics so that more time could be given to vocational classes. This might comprise of a program where one or two days a week might be spent in a resource room learning the skills outlined above, and the remainder of the week in actual workshops or vocational work-study programs (like BOCES, on Long Island), where they receive intensified instruction in whatever specific skills interest them (plumbing, auto mechanics, cosmotology, etc.).

If a student with mild disabilities leaves high school with the benefit of having gained a good working knowledge in a specific

skill, his chances of making a smooth transition into the workplace are favorable. In a community residence, he will be better prepared to increase his level of independent performance.

Home-living Skills

Home-living skills (or independent living skills) incorporatesuch skills as managing money, banking and decision-making. These skills are most likely covered in a vocational class. Since so much is covered in vocational classes, a modification in the curriculum might include a separate special class which would deal in specific areas such as money management and banking. This could also be incorporated into their math programs.

Obviously, a young adult with disabilities who is better prepared in independent living skills will make the transition to employment with a greater advantage than one who is not. In a community residence, these skills are essential for self-reliance, the ultimate goal.

Personal/Social Skills

Interpersonal skills such as grooming, personal hygiene and education concerning dating, relationships, sex, and drug and alcohol abuse are usually covered in a health class. A young adult with mild disabilities about to enter the adult world may need additional training in these areas. This might be accomplished by modifying the curriculum to include workshops and discussion

groups over a period of time where each topic might be addressed for an extended amount of time.

For successful transition into the workplace, it is crucial that a young adult with mild disabilities seeking employment be aware of the importance of this aspect of his education. Personal appearance and grooming play significant roles in the hiring of any new employees regardless of their disability. Drug and alcohol abuse, dating and sex education need to be reinforced in programs at community residences to enable these young adults to adjust and handle the enormous consequences that might arise by a misunderstanding or difficulty in handling these situations, especially when living with other people.

In conclusion, school systems need to address these areas more closely by having their curriculum meet the needs of their students. By careful reorganization of the curriculum, hopefully the gap between school and adult life will be diminished. With the help of successful agencies like the Young Adult Institute, which helps young adults with disabilities make smooth transitions into the adult world after high school, school systems might begin a venture of curriculum exploration that would analyze and begin instruction in some of the areas that YAI has found high school students to be deficient in.

Finally, cooperative planning must include the entire transition process by coordinating services provided by preparatory programs (secondary schools), linkage resources (public/private

agencies and parents), and community receiving environments (work settings, post-secondary education programs, and residential facilities)(Stodden, Boone 1987,p.538). Parents, teachers, local community leaders plus the individual state agencies usually involved in the transitional process for the handicapped need to be committed to communication and the individual roles each party must play.

Ultimately, the combined efforts of parents, administrators, and service agencies must work together to make the transition process as smooth as possible so that young adults with disabilities can make meaningful and significant contributions in our society.

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